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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI PRISON VISIT: AS CONDITIONS CONTINUE TO IMPROVE,
GODJ ASKS FOR USG ASSISTANCE

REF: 08 DJIBOUTI 753

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. During an October 22 visit to Djibouti's Gabode Prison, EmbOffs noted that conditions continued to improve. A new prison guard force was fully operational, and had created a noticeably calmer and more orderly atmosphere. Aging and inadequate physical infrastructure contributed to some persistent problems, such as filled-to-capacity cell blocks. However, EmbOffs noted that prisoners received adequate food and medical treatment, and that women, minors, and sick prisoners were held separately. There were no AmCit prisoners. In welcoming the U.S. visit, the Minister of Justice and prison officials requested that the USG consider helping Djibouti improve prison conditions not just through observation, but with concrete support-such as assistance with new infrastructure, or help in forging partnerships with local or international nongovernmental organizations working on issues of prisoner well-being and rehabilitation. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) ConOff, PolOff, and ConAsst visited Djibouti's Gabode Prison on October 22. The visit had been requested via diplomatic note and was coordinated through the Ministry of Justice. Director of Penitential Administration Mr. Salah Djama and Capt. Mohamed Djama Yonis of the Penitential Security Service (PSS) accompanied EmbOffs on the prison tour, which included the PSS headquarters, women's wards for sentenced and pre-trial prisoners, a minors' ward, infirmary and sick wards, selection of men's wards, and prison kitchen facilities. While the visit did not include every prison facility and cell block, EmbOffs were shown every area they requested to see, and the requested areas to be visited were not announced in advance. Excluding small temporary holding facilities in outlying towns and the temporary police detention facility at Nagad, Gabode Prison is Djibouti's only prison. According to Ministry of Justice and local officials, renovations on a smaller prison in the northern town of Obock are now complete, but the facility is not yet in use.

PRISONER COUNT: A FULL HOUSE, MOSTLY DJIBOUTIAN

¶3. (SBU) Prison officials showed EmbOffs the daily accounting sheet showing 519 prisoners for October 22. Of this number, 231 had been sentenced, while the remaining 288 were awaiting trial. There were 26 women and five minors. Capt. Yonis said that a decade ago, most prisoners in Djibouti had been foreigners. Now, he said, usually about three-quarters of the prisoners were Djiboutian. On October 22, there were 321 Djiboutians (sixty-two percent), 163 Ethiopians

(thirty-one percent), 29 Somalis (six percent), 2 Yemenis, and 4 of other nationalities. There were no/no AmCit prisoners. The prison had recently housed a record high of about 700 prisoners, before 130 youths implicated in juvenile delinquency and stone-throwing incidents were granted a Presidential pardon from their six-month sentences on October 14. Gabode's top realistic capacity, Director Salah said, is probably around 500. The Minister of Justice told PolOff October 14 that the decision had been made to pardon the 130 youth offenders in order to allow them to go back to school, instead of likely sinking back into delinquency after finishing their sentences.

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NEW PRISON GUARD SERVICE BRINGS AN ORDERLY
ATMOSPHERE TO AGING FACILITIES

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14. (SBU) EmbOffs began the prison visit with a tour of the adjacent headquarters building of the newly-established Penitential Security

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Service (PSS), which has fully replaced the previous national police guard force. Most applicants for the PSS were required to hold at least a high-school diploma, and were in general more educated than the previous police guards. The PSS received training from a Senegalese expert, and continued to receive some training from the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), which visited the prison every three to four months. The PSS consists of about 100 staff, of whom 30 are administrative and 70 operational, including 9 female guards. EmbOffs noted that following the transition to PSS guards, the atmosphere in the prison was noticeably calmer and more orderly. Prison officials reported that incidents of collaboration between guards and prisoners to subvert prison rules had decreased. Capt. Yonis said that while the mild narcotic khat was technically not allowed in the prison, it was occasionally tolerated, both because it is legal and widely consumed in Djibouti, and because it tended to have a calming effect on those who chew it. Capt. Yonis said that prison guards occasionally used temporary isolation of one or two hours to discipline prisoners who acted out or started fights, and that this was generally effective.

15. (SBU) Gabode Prison's main original construction, Capt. Yonis said, dates from the 1950s. Gabode Prison is located in Djibouti City, on prime waterfront property close to the President's personal residence. While Capt. Yonis and Salah said that GODJ had long been discussing construction of a new prison facility outside of the city, they had no information on imminent plans. EmbOffs visited one of several large cell blocks for men, each holding about fifty prisoners. The cell blocks all provided adequate water for washing and drinking, and adequate toilet facilities. However, they were filled to capacity. Capt. Yonis and Salah said that while prison officials did their best to separate sentenced prisoners from pre-trial detainees, space constraints made achieving full separation difficult, and it was not always possible. They noted that while lengthy pre-trial detention was still a problem, they had seen great improvement from previous years. While previously there had been some cases of detainees waiting six years for trial, now pre-trial detention generally did not exceed three years.

16. (SBU) EmbOffs also visited quarters for women (including separate quarters for sentenced prisoners and pre-trial detainees)

and quarters for minors. The minors all had cot-style beds, and a television. In the women's quarters, EmbOffs saw one child of about nine months whose mother was a prisoner. Capt. Yonis and Salah said that young children were generally allowed to stay with their mothers if necessary. However, in this case, prison officials had been trying to find a better solution for this child, whose mother was suffering from serious mental illness. Currently, another female prisoner was caring for the child, who appeared clean and well-fed, but who did not have a crib. Prison officials noted that sufficient mental health care was very difficult to find in Djibouti.

HEALTH CARE AND FOOD: BASIC BUT ADEQUATE

¶7. (SBU) Capt. Yonis and Salah said that a large portion of the prison's annual budget of 18 million DJF (just over USD 101,694) was dedicated to purchasing food for prisoners. Prisoners were fed three meals a day, with meat served on alternate days. EmbOffs visited the kitchen facilities, which were adequate but rudimentary, and saw rice being prepared for the mid-day meal. Salah also said that families who wished to bring food to prisoners were allowed to do so.

¶8. (SBU) Salah and Capt. Yonis said that the prison had a small pharmacy, staffed by several nurses and a doctor who visited four times a week. Serious cases were evacuated to Peltier Hospital, Djibouti's main public hospital. The GODJ paid for all medical care for prisoners. Top health concerns among the prison population included tuberculosis, bronchitis, HIV/AIDS, and

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diabetes. Salah estimated that about a dozen prisoners were HIV-positive, and were receiving medication. Salah said that although the prisoner intake process included a health evaluation, one issue was the difficulty of knowing which prisoners were suffering from which illnesses. Prison and medical staff could and did suggest to prisoners that looked unwell that they consider an HIV/AIDS test. Seriously ill prisoners were separated from the general population. EmbOffs visited one sick ward, which appeared adequate, but basic and filled-to-capacity. ICRC officials have previously reported that ICRC provides monthly deliveries of soap, bleach, and cleaning powder to prisoners.

GODJ REQUESTS USG ASSISTANCE,

NGO PARTNERSHIPS

¶9. (SBU) In welcoming EmbOffs to Gabode Prison, Salah underlined that the GODJ was happy to host such visits in a spirit of transparency. However, he said, the GODJ was also looking not just for "reports," but for partnerships with donor countries to help further improve prison conditions. Capt. Yonis said that the new PSS was mandated not only to assure security at the prison, but to rehabilitate prisoners. While security was the first concern, Capt. Yonis said, the PSS was looking to work on rehabilitation, and would welcome partnerships with local or international NGOs to further this goal. The GODJ is already working with UNICEF on issues of juvenile justice, he said. Similarly, Capt. Yonis and

Salah said, if there were an NGO or religious group interested in building a church for prisoners' use, such assistance would be welcomed. Currently prisoners have access to a mosque, but there is no other religious building.

¶10. (SBU) In an October 14 meeting with PolOff, Minister of Justice Mohamed Barkhat Abdillahi said that the GODJ was planning to construct several new buildings and facilities at the Gabode Prison site, including new quarters for female prisoners and for minors, a playing field, and a rehabilitation center. Minister Abdillahi requested USG assistance for these projects, noting that the GODJ was informally approaching donors on this issue and would follow up with a more formal request at a later date.

COMMITTED TO TRANSPARENCY; BUT
LOOKING FOR CONCRETE HELP, TOO

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT. For several years, the GODJ has readily allowed EmbOffs to visit Gabode Prison, and has openly acknowledged both improvements and shortcomings in prison conditions. While the GODJ clearly wants to guarantee that prison conditions meet or exceed international standards, it also acknowledges that it often lacks the financial and human resources to do so. In requesting more direct collaboration with the USG to improve prison conditions, the GODJ has shown that it welcomes international scrutiny of its prisons, but is also seeking more concrete partnerships to reach its goals. Post will continue to engage with prison officials, and appreciates Washington guidance on what resources may be available to help Djibouti improve its prison system. END COMMENT.
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